

“This may be one of those rare occasions in history when, rather than catching up to European trends, Russia is poised to show the way.”



Nicolai N. Petro, “[I dag er måske en af de sjældne lejligheder i Ruslands historie, hvor de I stedet for at forsøge indhente europæiske tendens er klar til at vise vejen](#),” in Marie Krarup ed., *Ny Kold Krig*, (Copenhagen: Hovedland, 2018), pp. 194-209. ISBN-13: 9788770706100.¹

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Do Europe and Russia have a future together? Why is the relationship between Russia and the EU so bad right now?

Setting political disagreements aside, Russian culture and history have always been inextricable from European culture and history. It therefore makes little sense to discuss Europe and Russia as if they were separate entities. The better parts Europe’s intellectual community have always understood this.

The bad relationship comes from a narrowing of our relations to political agendas. If we were to open our minds and our hearts to the wealth of our common cultural and religious heritage we would come to appreciate just how much Eastern and Western Europeans have in common. Alas, this common framework is at odds with the narrower framework of Western values that some seek to impose on

¹ Marie Krarup is a member of the Danish Parliament. From 1998-2001 she served as assistant defense attaché at the Danish embassy in Moscow with the rank of Major. She holds an M.A. in Slavic languages of Eastern Europe Institute from the University of Copenhagen.

Europe as a whole. This has led to a crisis, not only in relations between Russia and the EU, but to a crisis of European institutions and skepticism of the EU agenda.

Is Russia a part of Europe? Do Russians have a non-European mentality that prevents the interaction between Europeans and Russians?

Attempts to define other peoples and cultures as inferior run like a red skein through European history. Alongside the achievements of what intellectual historians call “The Enlightenment” run the dark seams of colonialism and slavery, which set out to conquer and transform the world.

These attitudes lingered throughout the Cold War precisely because they allowed for a sharp distinction to be drawn with the enemy Other. Hence, I deem attempts to draw a sharp distinction between our values and those of others (the so called “values gap”) as little more than efforts to justify political conflict.

Do you think that Russophobia exists? Does Russophobia consist of the Western prejudice that that Russians have special negative characteristics?

I agree. Singling out Russian history as unique, and overlooking similar episodes in the history of other nations is clearly meant to foster hatred of “the Other.” Such agendas of hate have become all too commonplace around the world.

Don't the current crises in Crimea and Ukraine show that Russia is expansionist?

All nations at one time or another have been expansionist. They could scarcely have come into existence otherwise. It is not Russophobic to criticize aspects of Russian colonial expansion or Russian foreign policy. It is, however, ahistorical and hypocritical to argue that Russia has always acted differently in this regard from other nations. Furthermore, it is Russophobic to suggest that the reason has to do with characteristics that are uniquely Russian.

Many compare the situation in Europe today with the 1930-ies. Do you agree with this comparison?

Historical analogies are always interesting, but never determinative. There are simply too many situational differences, including the actions and personalities of the main historical actors, to use history for accurate prediction. If there is a new war in Europe it will be because of the specific actions taken by the present generation of political leaders, not because of any historical determinism.

Russians believe that the constitutional coup took place in Ukraine in February. Russia also accuses Ukraine of allowing fascist forces to grow, and to pay tribute to Stepan Bandera, who supported the Nazis during the Second World War. Are these accusations true?

These are distinct questions, though not unrelated. Many Ukrainians today, including a plurality of those living in Eastern and Southern Ukraine, regard the events of February 2014 as a coup d'etat. It is also true that popular attitudes toward Stepan Bandera and the OUN/UPA differ dramatically in Eastern and Southern Ukraine from popular attitudes in Western Ukraine.

In November and December of 2013 the Maidan movement was still fairly popular in the East and South. What made it unpopular there were the increasing manifestations of Western Ukrainian nationalism and violence which were designed to force the ouster of president Yanukovych, and that culminated on February 22, 2014.

In Russia people were thrilled about the annexation of Crimea. In Europe and the United States, people were shaken. How can reactions be so different?

I disagree. Despite the rhetoric of European and American politicians the allegiance of Crimeans is a matter of indifference to the vast majority of Americans and Europeans since it does not affect their security or livelihood in any way. For Russian political leaders, on the other hand, Crimea is a matter of Russia's strategic security on its southern flank. Seeing the rise on nationalists in the Ukrainian government who had long vowed to end the presence of the Black Sea Fleet, Russia took take advantage of the political disarray in Kiev to ensure its geopolitical interests.

The difference in popular attitudes stems from the fact that even as a part of Ukraine most Crimeans felt a strong tie with Russia and were therefore happy to rejoin it. This is especially true given the threat they perceived to their autonomy from the new nationalist government in Kiev.

Does Russia want to seize the Baltic?

A careful reading of the national security and foreign policy documents of the past twenty-five years reveals no Russian strategic interest in any of the Baltic States beyond cooperation in the sustainability of the Baltic Sea, and concern for the rights of former Soviet citizens who are now classified as "non-citizens" in those countries.

How do you view the war in Ukraine?

I happen to believe that the current conflict in Eastern Ukraine is first and foremost an internal conflict. As for Russia and the West, each side supports different regions within Ukraine, but they have only a limited ability to change the nature of this regional conflict, which goes back many decades. Both Russia and the West say that they want political and economic stability in Ukraine, but they disagree strongly about how that can be achieved.

The West, oblivious to the cultural differences in Ukraine affect politics, assumes that if corruption is reduced the economy will grow and cultural divisions will simply fade away. Russia, on the other hand, views Ukraine as a culturally fragmented society. According to this view stability can be achieved only if political authorities accept the bi-cultural nature of Ukraine and create a constitutional framework that will give the country's different communities equal rights.

So long as communities within Ukraine do not talk to each other directly, which they have so far been unwilling to do, there is little than any external party can do to end the conflict.

In *The Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel Huntington writes that Ukraine is a divided country. Some believe think that this is the reason for the war in eastern Ukraine today. What do you think?

When Huntington wrote his book, he highlighted Ukraine as an example of a “cleft country.” Within Ukraine he even singled out Crimea as a region of particular contention.² At first glance, everything that has happened in Ukraine since 2013 seems to confirm Huntington’s thesis that clashes within cleft countries are the result of being “territorially bestride the fault lines between civilizations.”³ The violent ouster of the Yanukovich government in February 2014 ended this delicate balance and civil conflict came. Following Huntington’s logic the conflict in Ukraine can now have one of only two possible outcomes. The first is the separation of Ukraine into two territories corresponding to their predominant cultural identity. The second is the subjugation of one cultural identity by the other.

Neither of these, however, is likely to succeed because both parts of Ukraine claim to speak for the whole. The only way out is to change the political discourse from one that focuses on the differences between Eastern and Western Ukraine, to one that highlights what they have in common.

The collapse of the USSR left 20-25 million Russians beyond Russia’s borders, as a Russian diaspora. Is this a problem for Europe and for Russia?

Such diasporas were a serious concern in the 1990s when political and economic uncertainty engulfed the entire post-Soviet region. Over the course of that decade there was a considerable migration of peoples away from regions where they did not feel welcome. Today, however, in all but a few enclaves, those families that have remained have established a new pattern of co-existence with new national authorities in the former Soviet republics. The only country where this is still a burning issue today is Ukraine.

I once heard a top Latvian advisor say that we are facing a new 1991 with respect to Russia. In 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed because of a lack of freedom. Today Putin's Russia will soon fall apart because of its lack of freedom. What do you think?

I see no evidence of serious political forces within Russia working for its disintegration. Even marginal opposition candidates, like Alexei Navalnyi, claim to be for the consolidation of Russia.

Second, “lack of freedom” is a matter of perception, and in this case the perception that matters most is that of the Russian people. Since all surveys point to the fact that Russians are at present quite comfortable with their political system and its leaders, I see nothing to support this advisor’s argument.

In his 2016 book, *Should We Be Afraid of Russia?*, political analyst and author Dmitry Trenin writes that Europe should not be afraid of a strong Russia, but of a weak Russia. A strong Russia is likely to focus on creating a stable nation-state, whereas a weak Russia could fall apart, creating waves of chaos and instability. What do you think - should Europe be more afraid of a strong or a weak Russia?

The late American historian Martin Malia, in *Russian under Western Eyes* (Harvard 1999), made the point that Europeans have a pattern of fearing Russia when it is strong and embracing it when it is weak.

² Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2007), p. 138.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

But because personal perceptions are formed largely when people are young, political leaders find themselves behind the curve when assessing actual developments. They still see Russia as weak, when it has grown strong; or, they expect it to be aggressive when it is actually becoming more defensive, and *vice versa*. The task before us is to avoid succumbing to the fears and prejudices that we grew with and to respond to circumstances more accurately and pragmatically.

What about Russia? Should Russia be afraid of a strong EU? Or, is Russia interested in a divided Europe?

Since the misperception is mutual, the solution is the same. I suspect that political forces that can cast off their prejudices and look for mutual benefits in the relationship will be more effective in advancing their country's interests.

Today there is widespread fear of Russian misinformation in the EU. To counter this the EU has created a special working group to combat Russian disinformation - East StratCom. What do you think of this initiative?

“Disinformation” and “fake news” have always existed. There is a natural human propensity to manipulate information for one's own benefit. It is also logical that governments take a very active role in this, as part of their security obligations.

What we have today, however, is a far more destructive phenomenon. It is fake news about “fake news.” There is a general lack of belief in the integrity of all news outlets. This is dangerous because news outlets shape our understanding of the world. Lack of faith in these “gate keepers” of information therefore undermines our faith in politics, economics, and even truth and knowledge in general.

Part of this phenomenon is the result of the explosion of sources of information. Its roots, however, go back much further, to the deconstruction of the relationship between meaning and text, which is still a respected academic enterprise. While there has been a counter-reaction to deconstruction (a call for a return to traditional modes of understanding), along with attempts to restrict the type of information that people can have access to, these alone will not succeed in restoring faith in the media and public institutions. That is why the West, a society that values skepticism but is also dependent on widespread faith in its institutions, is in such a profound state of crisis.

What is the state of freedom of expression in Ukraine today?

Most suppression of free expression in Ukraine takes the same form that it does in the West—self-censorship. Opinions that the political establishment disapproves of are simply ignored by the “legitimate” press.

Since the 2014 Maidan, however, there are three new factors. The first is the creation of new institutions, like the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, that try to shape people's beliefs and thinking.

The second is the passage of legislation to punish those who are unwilling to change their thinking. Recent examples include the forced de-communization of place names, the reassessment of the

Ukrainian Insurgent Army's collaboration with Nazi Germany, the censorship of Russian language in media, films, books, and even access to the Russian internet. This results in the *de facto* suppression of the views of those Ukrainian citizens who wish to express themselves in their native language, Russian.

The third factor is the physical intimidation of Russophone Ukrainians that is routinely exercised by right wing nationalists. The combination of these three factors is transforming Ukraine today into a *de facto* ochlocracy.

What is the state of freedom of expression in Russia in your opinion?

I evaluate freedom of speech by the ease with which an individual can access a wide variety of points of view. By this measure there are no serious obstacles to free speech in Russia. Other criteria—such as whether the points of view expressed in Russia are the same as those expressed in the Western media, or whether access is provided to unpopular opinions, strike me as inappropriate and condescending.

It is often said that Russians have few news options because three-quarters of them watch state funded television. This is a very misleading figure, because it fails to mention that only 2% of Russians rely on any one source for their news. These days the most common source of news for Russians is the internet which, for persons under 34, is more popular than television.

Measured purely by the ease of access of diverse sources of information, Russia is as free as any Western country. Not only does the Russian internet domain have more users than any other national domain in Europe, 99.7% are active in social networks, making Russia the largest and most socially active internet community in the world. It also has the most popular translation sites for western media, making foreign language news sources more readily available to Russians than to most Americans.

What is your impression of the press image of Russia and Ukraine in the West? Is it tendentious? If so, why?

I am not the first to point out that the Putin-obsessed portrayal of Russia in the media is a huge obstacle to understanding. Stephen Cohen, formerly of Princeton University, has long challenged journalists to stop what he calls “the pointless demonization” of Putin, which his colleague at Columbia, Padma Desai, simply calls “Putinophobia.” Former U.S. Ambassador to Russia, Jack Matlock, Jr. has condemned typical Western reporting about Russia, as has Canada's former ambassador to Russia, Christopher Westdal, who describes the “standard portrait [of Putin] is so wrong that it's hard to keep one's balance taking swings at such a straw man.”⁴

The image of Ukraine in the media is also prone to unhealthy extremes. There is a category of Western media that routinely dismisses any criticism of Ukraine because it “plays into Moscow's hands.” There are others that focus exclusively on the ostensible failure of all reform efforts there. Missing from both is any sense of historical context that would provide readers with an explanation of why the transformation of Ukraine has been so painful, as well as why most Russians are so supportive of their current political system.

⁴ Stephen Cohen, “Stop the pointless demonization of Putin,” <http://blogs.reuters.com> (May 7, 2012); Padma Desai, “End Putinophobia and try to normalise relations,” *Financial Times (UK)* (March 14, 2008); Jennifer Campbell, “Putin no villain, ex-ambassador says,” *Ottawa Citizen (Canada)* (March 21, 2012).

Belarusian writer, Svetlana Aleksievich, has said that it is wrong for Putin to cooperate closely with the church. She calls it medieval. What do you think?

In the tradition of Eastern Orthodox Christianity a strong and popular church is a natural partner of a strong and popular state. This pattern, established under the Roman Emperor Justinian in the early sixth century, is known as *symphonia*. Since religion is on the rise in Russia, it is wholly within the pattern of Russian history that it should re-establish its partnership with the State.

This is not the post-Enlightenment approach to religion in politics which, to be perfectly frank, presumes that religious attitudes will eventually die and be replaced by a secular moral code that will be administered by the state. It has been apparent for at least half a century now that this post-Enlightenment assumption about religion is wrong. What the future holds, and whether it will be better than either *symphonia* or a secular model, remains to be seen.

Is there a possibility that Russia and the West can work together to fight the threat of Islamic terrorism?

It makes a great deal of sense for Russia and the West to collaborate against terrorism, but to be effective such collaboration must be based on trust. It is well known, for example, that Russian security services flagged the Tsarnayev brothers (the “Boston Bomber”) and alerted the FBI to their concerns.⁵ Distrust of the source of this information, however, caused these warnings to go unheeded.

Can we learn from past mistakes? Individuals can, but rarely do. Governments even more so. Until American opinion makers revise their deeply held assumptions about Russia many such opportunities will be wasted.

The Russian conservative Christian writer, Alexander Shchipkov, says that Russia is ahead of the West today, in the sense that Russia saw the need to return to the sources of its traditions -- Christianity, culture, language, nationality -- before Europe did. He believes that the horrifying experience of communism in 1917-1991, and the chaotic liberalism of the 1990s, led to a clearer view of the conservatism of the majority of Russians. He also believes that the same understanding would benefit Europe, which is moving further and further from its own traditions. He therefore believes that Russia could be a pioneer. What do you think?

I have come to a similar conclusion, though it is based on evidence provided by Brexit, the American elections, and the recent French elections. These all strike me as predictable counter-reactions to decades of movement in the direction of what the late Isaiah Berlin called “positive freedom.”⁶

America has long seen itself as the global enforcer of “positive freedom,” which it associates with global liberalism. It believes it has the right to impose them because, as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright

⁵ “Russia warned U.S. about Boston Marathon bomb suspect Tsarnaev: report,” *Reuters* (March 25, 2014). <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-explosions-boston-congress/russia-warned-u-s-about-boston-marathon-bomb-suspect-tsarnaev-report-idUSBREA2P02Q20140326>.

⁶ ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ was Berlin's inaugural lecture as Chichele Professor of Political and Social Theory at Oxford University. http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published_works/tcl/.

put it, America “stands tall and sees further than other countries into the future.”⁷ Russia, on the other hand, rejects the idea that any country or civilization may impose values. This can only be the prerogative of international institutions, which are the only ones that reflect a genuine global consensus.

Russia today seems better positioned than most nations to reap the benefits of this counter-reaction for one simple reason—namely, it emerged and began to take root in Russia a decade earlier than in the rest of Europe. This may be one of those rare occasions in history where Russia, rather than catching up to European trends, is poised to lead the way.

What forces in Russia today oppose Putin's regime? Do they have much public support?

I suspect that few Russians are either entirely for or entirely against Putin, or the current political system. They see both advantages and disadvantages to it. Politics is about forming effective coalitions that can win elections and govern. When an alternative emerges that speaks to most needs of most Russian citizens, I am confident that it will receive the most votes. So far, no such alternative has emerged.

Will Russia and Europe be able to find each other at some point in the future?

In *The Clash of Civilizations* Samuel Huntington argues that Russia is a dissonant part of Western civilization but, in the final analysis, still part of the West. In its competition with civilizations that are truly inimical to it, therefore, he says that the West must do everything it can to reconcile with Russia and bind it to the West. I call this envisioning Russia as part of the West.

For those who define Russia as the antithesis of the West this is impossible. But, as Martin Malia and David Foglesong have convincingly shown, such views are driven by ideological assumptions regarding the supremacy of Western Europe within the overall context of European civilization.⁸ This is, understandably, a view that is dear to the hearts of many Western Europeans, but it has little in common with the historical, religious, or cultural record.

The task of crafting a better future is therefore linked to re-embracing the idea of Russia as part of Europe. In this context tensions would subside dramatically, opportunities now dismissed *a priori* could be embraced, and a common European home could actually be built.

This is precisely what was *not* done after the collapse of the USSR. Looking to the future, I can think of no vision more capable of inspiring a resurgence of the European Idea than one that includes Russia, and thereby ends the East-West conflict once and for all.

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⁷ Bob Herbert, “In America; War Games,” *New York Times*, February 22, 1998.

<http://www.nytimes.com/1998/02/22/opinion/in-america-war-games.html>.

⁸ Malia *op. cit.*; David S. Foglesong, *The American Mission and the 'Evil Empire': The Crusade for a 'Free Russia' since 1881* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).